Jacob K. Javits Oral History Interview – RFK#1, 06/19/1970

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**Biographical Note**  
Javits was a Senator from New York from 1957 through 1981. In this interview Javits discusses initial encounters with and impressions of Robert F. Kennedy [RFK]; RFK as Attorney General and judicial appointments; RFK’s 1964 Senate campaign; working with Senator RFK and issues between RFK and Javits in the Senate; the “many capacities” of RFK; RFK’s public speaking ability; and Bedford-Stuyvesant, among other issues.

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Jacob Javits

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Oral History Interview

with

JACOB JAVITS

June 19, 1970
New York, New York

By William vanden Heuvel

For the Robert F. Kennedy Oral History Program
of the Kennedy Library

VANDEN HEUVEL: Senator, could you recall your first meetings with
Robert Kennedy? I don’t mean just as a senator, but do you
recall when you first encountered him in life?

JAVITS: Yes, I did meet him when he was counsel to the Special
Investigations Committee of the Government Operations Com-
mittee with Senator Joseph R. McCarthy, but then very
briefly and inadequately. And I'm sure I met him with President Kennedy
when President Kennedy was a Senator. But he never made any very firm
impression on me until his time as Attorney General. When he was Attorney
General, then I . . .

VANDEN HEUVEL: Just for a moment, Senator, on the Senate rackets committee
did you have any impression of him? Did you have any en-
counter with him? Did you feel that he was identified in
one way or another? You were then a member of the Senate Labor and Public
Welfare Committee, as you are now.

JAVITS: No, not at that time. I came to the Senate in 1957, so that
investigation preceded my time. But I had no distinct im-
pression of Robert Kennedy until he became Attorney General,
and I made it my business to get to know him better. Indeed, I stated at the
time that he was appointed Attorney General that the fact that he was the
President's brother shouldn't stand against him, provided that he really had
the ability that it took and that the President had the confidence in him
which the job required, as undoubtedly he did.

VANDEN HEUVEL: Were you a member of the Judiciary Committee?

JAVITS: No, not at that time. I became a member of the Judiciary
Committee later.
VANDEN HEUVEL: Do you recall any of the comments that were made by your colleagues or that you felt yourself at the time of his appointment?

JAVITS: Yes, it was freely stated that Robert Kennedy owed his appointment to the fact that he'd managed his brother's political campaign and that he would be his brother's political lieutenant—and unkind words like "hatchet man" were used. I didn't go with that. I cannot tell you now what impression I had at the time, but it obviously was not compatible with that idea because I expressed myself as favorable to the appointment and as being unwilling to see the appointment rejected on the ground that he was the President's brother.

VANDEN HEUVEL: Do you have any recollections of his service as counsel on the McClellan Committee?

JAVITS: Not really. Again, I know I encountered him, but he made no firm impression on me at that time. Nor in the Army hearings did I gain any particular impression of him. Most of the attention was centered upon others, especially Roy Cohn. Indeed, I encountered Roy Cohn at speaking engagements in New York. I remember one very distinctly before the Bronx County Bar Association in which we expressed very different views on civil liberties issues.

VANDEN HEUVEL: That was Roy Cohn?

JAVITS: That was Roy Cohn, in a sense, that obscured my view of Robert Kennedy.

VANDEN HEUVEL: In the 1960 campaign, as one of the ablest and most successful of the political figures in the country, did you have any impressions or encounters or attitudes towards Robert Kennedy's role as campaign manager?

JAVITS: Yes. He was obviously very astute, very effective, worked very well in team with his brother, who later became President. I thought he was especially bold. I found the quality of boldness his dominant characteristic, both in the primaries—in which I think he was a major factor in John F. Kennedy's success—and in the general election. But in the whole enterprise Robert Kennedy typified boldness.

VANDEN HEUVEL: Robert Kennedy, I think, probably felt that one of the most important things he did in his life was to direct his brother's campaign for the Presidency. Do you, looking back at that, have any particular feeling as to what enabled John Kennedy to win in 1960 that could well be regarded as part of the strategy that Robert Kennedy had a part in making?
JAVITS: Well, I think it was a quality of freshness. The feeling was that there was staleness in the existing establishment and that, while it had been inspired by a man like Dwight D. Eisenhower who was above party and above place and above partisanship, there was an infusion of energy, of style, of excitement in John F. Kennedy which was heavily accented and dramatized by the debates. And I believe that it was as much the demeanor and the flair which was shown in the debates, the sort of devil-may-care attitude. But at the same time the intensity of concern for the people, which characterized both John Kennedy and Robert Kennedy, carried the day. Really it was a victory for dynamism, style, movement, far more than substance.

VANDEN HEUVEL: Robert Kennedy became Attorney General in January of 1961. Do you recall your first encounters with him in that official position?

JAVITS: Yes. We had very early encounters in the appointment of judges, in the appointment of the United States Attorney for the Southern District and other districts in New York State, in cases, antitrust and other cases which presented constituent problems. And I went over to see the Attorney General. I also was very active in discussing youth problems with him, and he was very interested from early on in the narcotics addiction problem. I had been chairman of the subcommittee dealing with narcotics addiction for the Attorneys General of the United States when I was an Attorney General. And I had a long standing relationship with that. As a matter of fact, the people who set up the so-called methadone treatment for narcotics--there's a doctor named Marie Nyswander who was the first person who got me involved in the narcotics field back in 1955 and 1956. So I went to see the Attorney General, I would say, quite frequently. I would say I saw him not less often than once a month while he was Attorney General, and we talked on the telephone more often.

VANDEN HEUVEL: What impression did you have of his attitude toward judicial appointments?

JAVITS: I thought it was very high. He had a shirt-sleeve approach to life. He almost invariably, when I went to see him at the Attorney General's office, was in his shirt-sleeves and stayed that way. He gave you that feeling, but he had a very high respect for the judiciary and a high respect for the law, sought quality, encouraged me to produce men of quality and gave every indication that if I could, he'd appoint them or see that they were appointed without much argument and without too much preoccupation with their political qualification. I thought he demonstrated a very noble attitude in respect to judicial appointments.

VANDEN HEUVEL: Do you recall the controversies that surrounded the appointment of men like Judge William H. Cox in the southern areas of the country?
JAVITS: Yes, I do. And of course, I'm sure that he was not above practical political considerations involving a region and the senators of that region. But certainly that particular face was not shown to me. I do recall, that there were instances in which he told me that they just had to appoint a Democrat from the area and couldn't appoint one of the people I recommended, even though he was good, but that they would try to get to it in terms of a balance in the political complexion of the court. But I had the feeling that while he was very pragmatic about politics, he wasn't bitterly partisan and that it was possible to get a Republican judge appointed here and there and that it actually took place, but that you might have to bide your time a bit before it could be done.

VANDEN HEUVEL: What about an appointment like Irving Ben Cooper?

JAVITS: Ben Cooper, I think that was the kind of a colorful appointment which Robert Kennedy enjoyed making, and he had no problem with me as I knew Cooper very well and liked him and approved of him.

VANDEN HEUVEL: What was your first encounter with him? Did you have conflicts with him as he served as his brother's Attorney General?

JAVITS: I think, aside from the fact that he felt, you know, on occasion that he had to appoint Democrats, some of whom I thought didn't have as much qualifications as others whom I could have suggested, I really had no run-in with him when he was Attorney General. I think my run-ins, such as they were, began when he became Senator and my colleague in the Senate.

VANDEN HEUVEL: How about conflicts in relation to civil rights legislation in the country in the days of the John Kennedy Administration?

JAVITS: Well, I think, again, there was always a suspicion that the Kennedys--because that's really the way they were regarded; it was very hard to regard Robert Kennedy as separate from the President and vice versa, thinking for a person in political life like myself was generally in terms of "the Kennedys" rather than either one separately. I did have a feeling that there were occasions in respect to civil rights enforcement, especially enforcement, where they might not be pushing hard enough because of the relationship to success for the Democratic Party to the so-called solid South or the Democratic vote in the South. I wouldn't say that was intrusive. I did not quite have the feeling that they were dragging their feet or in any way holding back in the civil rights field, but there was the coloration that they might be treading a little softly in an effort to minimize the political damage for really enforcing civil rights laws in the South.
VANDEN HEUVEL: Did you have any problems with him on the U.S. Attorneys appointments for the Southern District?

JAVITS: Not that I recall.

VANDEN HEUVEL: See, Robert M. Morgenthau was appointed, I guess, as the Administration began.

JAVITS: I think we agreed on that.

VANDEN HEUVEL: Then he resigned temporarily when he ran for the governorship. Then he resumed it.

JAVITS: Then he was reappointed, yes. I don't think we had any real problem on the United States Attorney.

VANDEN HEUVEL: Did you see Robert Kennedy socially during this period of time?

JAVITS: Yes, occasionally. Yes, I would say at other people's homes.

VANDEN HEUVEL: Do you have any impressions of him outside of his professional or political role before his brother's death?

JAVITS: I thought he was very cool, bright, and tough, and a fellow who was fun. You liked to deal with him and, even if he didn't go with you, you could feel that he gave you a straight answer and a straight reason, even though you wouldn't agree with it and even though it might be somewhat discreditable to him, as, for example, a strictly political reason. But he had a certain disdain for the lesser forms or gilding the lily, and there's a certain quality in that, a certain quality of sportsmanship and of swinging free as a personality. He certainly had that.

VANDEN HEUVEL: Do you, in looking back on that, have any particular recollection of incidents that established the relationship between the President and Robert Kennedy? Were there any particular times you saw them together that you recall, or anything that stands out in your mind that identifies their relationship to you?

JAVITS: I think it did stand out in my mind very strongly because I have an older brother, too, with whom I was associated up to 1954 in the law. I did feel as a matter of fact that the relationship was extraordinarily close between the President and his brother and that the President would go to great lengths to honor the relationship and not be afraid of it, not back away from it. I thought that the appointment of his brother to be Attorney General of the United States was quite an exercise of style and courage. Not many men would have done that. And he did it and it worked.
VANDEN HEUVEL: Did you ever think of Robert Kennedy as a political candidate personality?

JAVITS: No, because in the first place, he was always outside the context of New York until he suddenly showed up here. Somehow or other, I had always regarded him either as a political manager or an executive department official. Nobody dreamed that Jack Kennedy's career would be extinguished at the hands of an assassin. I just didn't think about him in political terms within the context of my own experience.

VANDEN HEUVEL: Can you recall anything relating to the events surrounding November 22, 1963, particularly as you developed your own thoughts about Robert Kennedy?

JAVITS: Well, I was very, very sorry for him. He seemed to be the mainstay of the family and seemed immediately to have taken over, as it were, from his brother. It struck me very forcibly. And I think that it lent the note of stability and removed the possibility of some recriminations which might have occurred, considering the uncertainty which surrounded the assassination at the time that it happened.

VANDEN HEUVEL: You mean his acceptance?

JAVITS: His acceptance of the fact, his lending himself to the naming of the new President, his taking charge of the Kennedy family, and his general fidelity to the role of the heir to a family responsibility.

VANDEN HEUVEL: Did you have occasion to see him after the President's death?

JAVITS: I believe so.

VANDEN HEUVEL: While he was still Attorney General?

JAVITS: Yes. I visited him, called on him, and did one or two things with him in that time.

VANDEN HEUVEL: Do you have any express recollections of a difference in him or your attitudes toward him?

JAVITS: No. I think he was very sad. He was hit very hard, very hard. A piece of his life had been lopped off. But I have no impression of any difference in his emotional gearing or reactions or general conduct.

VANDEN HEUVEL: As the political decisions of 1964 were being made, when
did you first have any understanding that he was considering running as Senator from New York?

JAVITS: Well, I must say I was amazed when the indications began to come in that he was going to establish residence here and make a try for the Senate here. I hadn't dreamed of it before and it was a very big surprise.

VANDEN HEUVEL: Did he consult with you at all?

JAVITS: No.

VANDEN HEUVEL: Did he ever ask...

JAVITS: Well, not at that time. I just didn't know him that well.

VANDEN HEUVEL: But he didn't try to tap your political experience in this State?

JAVITS: No. No, not at all. Not at all. He didn't tap it. As a matter of fact, I campaigned strongly, as strongly as I could, for his opponent, Senator [Kenneth B. Keating], who was my colleague and friend. But it had no reaction from Robert Kennedy. He made no attacks on me. He just dealt with his opponent, period.

VANDEN HEUVEL: Do you have any recollections of that campaign when you yourself were actively involved against him?

JAVITS: Well, the main recollection of that campaign was in the debate which he didn't have with Kenneth Keating and the boldness, and what would in someone else have been cheek, of his just knocking on the door of the studio, as it were, where Keating was making a broadcast and asking to be admitted so he could debate him. I arrived at that particular broadcast while it was going on, within very brief minutes after this whole incident had taken place, and so I got a very urgent blow-by-blow description of it, and it only confirmed in my mind not only the boldness of the Kennedys, but the style with which the boldness was carried out so that you could hardly take offense at it. It was just their natural way. He was in the studio and his opponent was on the air, so why not be on the air with him? It was a remarkable demonstration of an attitude which one associated more with royalty absolutely sure of its position than with any kind of a political candidate or American family. But this intuitive, complete uncaring about the conventions, about the traditions, but moving directly from point A to point B was, I think, the most signal characteristic.

VANDEN HEUVEL: Were you on the program with Senator Keating that night?

JAVITS: Yes, I was on that program. As a matter of fact, I was
supposed to introduce Keating and be on the program from
the beginning, but my plane was late. So I came a minute
or two or three after the broadcast had started and fitted right into my
place in it, but missed the incident of Robert Kennedy seeking admittance
in order to debate Keating.

VANDEN HEUVEL: But as you went into the studio, you were aware that
Robert Kennedy had been there?

JAVITS: I was aware that something had happened, something serious
had happened that involved Robert Kennedy's being there.
Something was told to me about his just having started his
own broadcast or something like that. So I was well aware of that.

VANDEN HEUVEL: That was a crucial event in that...

JAVITS: Very crucial. I think it might have been a big factor
in the election.

VANDEN HEUVEL: Yes. One of the things that helped Robert Kennedy, at least
in his mind at that time, was Keating's reaction to the
events because he rather was terrorized by it almost and
ran out of the studio and didn't talk to the reporters, and his staff kicked
over potted plants, and there was all kinds of commotion.

JAVITS: I was not a party to that part of it because I think I
remained in the studio when he left, but I was aware of a
fact that it shook him up considerably.

VANDEN HEUVEL: Another incident in that campaign that was significant was
the Fair Campaign Practices Committee authorizing some kind
of charges against Robert Kennedy's attacks on Keating for
his role in the...

JAVITS: Cuba.

VANDEN HEUVEL: No, in the nuclear test ban treaty. But were you involved
in that in any way?

JAVITS: No, I was not.

VANDEN HEUVEL: You were not involved?

JAVITS: I was not directly involved. I didn't handle Keating's
campaign. I was not his chairman. I spoke for him. But
then Nelson A. Rockefeller was running at the same time
so there was a certain amount of preoccupation I had with that.

VANDEN HEUVEL: Not Rockefeller. The Presidency. That was a presidential
year.
'64. That's right. That was Barry Goldwater. But in any case, I was preoccupied with the Presidency and with my own role in the campaign.

Did you talk to Robert Kennedy on election night? Do you recall the first time you talked to him once the election results were clear?

Very shortly after. I don't think it was election night, but very shortly after, he and I talked with each other about the fact that we'd have to work together, and he said that he wanted very much to work in team with me for the benefit of the State and that he hoped our personal relations would be very good. He saw no reason why they shouldn't be. And I said, of course, I felt the same way. And we agreed that we would get together as soon as we possibly could. And I think we did get together before he was sworn in.

Do you remember whether it was in Washington or here or whether it was ...

I think it was in Washington.

Was it a meeting with a deliberate agenda or was it just a rather informal exchange of...

Well, I had no advice. I wouldn't say I gave him advice, but he did ask me about what committees he ought to be on and asked me whether I would mind if he was on the Labor and Public Welfare Committee. And I said, "No, not at all."

Why did he want to be on that? With his brother on it and with you on it, it doesn't seem to make much ...

Well, I think it was a carrying on where his brother left off. I think his dominant feeling in respect to the Committee was entirely that. He wanted definitely to take over for his brother. I think he had that feeling in many things, many of the struggles he fought.

He and I did, for example, a rather interesting thing for the New Yorkers of Puerto Rican extraction in order to qualify them to vote. We took a long chance on an amendment which Senator Kennedy, Bob, brought up and which I joined him in. And, having joined him, I felt that my responsibility to satisfy the Senate on the law, that it was a valid exercise of Congressional power to deal with the qualification of the Puerto Ricans and the Spanish language, and I felt that that would be sustained by the courts and my main service to the enterprise was the fact that I said I would stand behind its constitutionality.
VANDEN HEUVEL: Now, how did something like that work? Was this an amendment that his office drafted and then he came to you or . . .

JAVITS: No, his office drafted an amendment. He proposed it on the floor. When I heard it, I arose and said that I thought it was a very good idea and I wanted to be a party to it. He was entirely agreeable that I should.

VANDEN HEUVEL: But he didn't consult you before he went on the floor?

JAVITS: No. From then on we worked together in respect to it. This was not unusual. He was not very forehanded about his Senate work. You almost thought that, you know, he walked in, it occurred to him, and he did it, which wasn't true. He was very well prepared and had his material checked out for him. So most of the things which I picked up and which he picked up from me were pretty much ad hoc on the floor as we did them.

VANDEN HEUVEL: Did you get the feeling, at least in those early weeks, that there were efforts, either by him or by his representatives, to box you in or to, in some way, isolate you or to identify himself separately from you?

JAVITS: No, I don't think he had any such consciousness at all. I did get the feeling of a certain amount of arrogance in him and his organization of just going ahead as if I didn't exist until I made myself very strongly felt as, for example, in the need for approving a particular Federal appointee. If I didn't approve him, he couldn't get confirmed.

VANDEN HEUVEL: Well, how did that--I mean, was there an incident that illustrated that?

JAVITS: I think there was. I definitely think there was, but I cannot remember the precise incident. But I think there was a particular incident in which the clearance was obtained from Kennedy's office without reference to me, and I just said flatly, "No," and that I would veto it and fight it on the floor.

VANDEN HEUVEL: And then do you recall talking to him personally about it?

JAVITS: Yes.

VANDEN HEUVEL: Did a time come when you had to have a straightening out of your relationship?

JAVITS: Oh, we always did. We had one periodically every two or three months when . . . He left a lot to his staff. He was busy on a very much broader theater. So he left a
great deal to his staff and every once in a while our relationship would break down because the staff had an idea—it may not have necessarily been his idea. In addition, he was quite tractable. If you had a complaint about him, you could sit down and straighten it out with him, and most chances there were that you would prevail. In other words, he wasn't all that sure and all that set on anything that he was contending for. But he maintained his position and you generally could compromise on it.

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VANDEN HEUVEL: Do you recall an incident, an amendment, that was related?

JAVITS: Yes, I do. It was an amendment with respect to including certain counties in the State of New York in Appalachia. It was a very early amendment of Robert Kennedy's when he was fairly new in the Senate. And he popped it on me very suddenly. It was that kind of internal management amendment for a State in which both senators generally join. I thought it was very rude and it caught me completely by surprise and would have embarrassed me politically if it were strictly his and not mine also. And I told him so in unmeasured terms and not without heat. And he appreciated that and said that he could understand it perfectly and would I join him in it and that he would try to make it clear that we were together in it. But by that time the amendment had carried on the floor in the short time that it had to be debated and I think his prestige on the Democratic side undoubtedly got it votes which it wouldn't have gotten otherwise.

But it was something which rankled with me because it was really very inconsiderate. Each of us could do that to the other if he wished and I made that clear to Robert. And, indeed, I don't think anything as overt as that happened again, although with him and his staff you always had to be alert because I think that without design they could proceed in a rather lordly fashion. Anything that they thought they wanted to do, they just went ahead and did, and if you wanted to assert yourself, as I felt I had to, you had to be rather aggressive about it yourself.

VANDEN HEUVEL: Did this come to pass, for example, on announcements of Federal programs or grants?

JAVITS: Yes, we had a lot of trouble about announcements of Federal programs. Naturally, there was sentiment—he was a very glamorous figure and man who carried a lot of prestige and so on. So that I had always had problems with that. But when you had a Democratic Administration in office, I had a big problem with that particular thing with Robert Kennedy. And again we simply had to be aggressive and assert ourselves and fight for our share of the opportunity. But, invariably, when I talked to him personally about it, we came to an accommodation. Indeed, I'm told, and I don't know whether this is true—perhaps
someone else will speak of it—that at one time he told his staff to do anything I wanted done, that he trusted me and that he knew I wouldn't impose, and just to do it. If there was any doubt about it or if they couldn't get hold of him, to do what I wanted.

VANDEN HEUVEL: Did you have the impression ever that the White House was trying to divide you and Kennedy as the two senators from New York?

JAVITS: No, but I did have the impression that the White House was not too anxious to build him up, and we had many indications of that. And I think it was true. I think that they felt he was built up enough. They didn't want to necessarily be laying on more bricks themselves.

VANDEN HEUVEL: Were there illustrations and appointments or Federal patronage that . . .

JAVITS: No. I wouldn't say that. I think they were more Democrats than worried about Kennedy. And they were hard-nosed about that. But I did have the distinct impression that, give or take 10 percent, they weren't anxious to build him up beyond the size that he should attain.

One of the most interesting events that occurred between Robert Kennedy and myself occurred in the Labor Committee. He, on one occasion in the consideration of a poverty program, literally on his way out the door, sort of turned around and made a motion to increase a given authorization by some three hundred million dollars and was about to proceed out the door. And I stopped him by saying that I thoroughly opposed it, that I didn't know what it was about and that I thought it was the most cavalier performance I'd ever seen to suddenly up a bill three hundred million dollars on your way out the door, and that unless he stayed and saw it through, he could forget it as far as I was concerned. If I had to stay there all week, I'd talk and kill it. Well, that kind of stopped him, and so he came back and explained that he hadn't really meant to proceed in that way and that he would stay and that it was important. And we then argued it out and finally settled, if memory serves me right, for a hundred million, a hundred million dollars for the particular thing that he wanted. But it was one of the few times that I really kind of brought him up sharply.

VANDEN HEUVEL: Do you remember when that was, just generally the month or just generally the year?

JAVITS: I should say . . . Well, it was when we were marking up the OEO [Office of Economic Opportunity] bill on a given occasion. When I say marking up, we were in executive session writing the bill. I would say that it was probably . . . Let's see. He was elected to the Senate in '64. I would say it probably was '65 or '66, not too long after he'd gotten to the Senate.
VANDEN HEUVEL: You knew him in many capacities, as a colleague in the Senate from New York State, in various community and social projects in the State, as a fellow member of a Senate committee, as a Senator, as a friend, as a professional colleague in the law. And some of those impressions, I think, would be invaluable for the sake of the history that this library will represent. For example, what was he like as a committee member in terms comparing to other committee members or just isolating him as a single member? And, in the context of that, how did he and his brother, for example, work? Edward Kennedy, I mean.

JAVITS: As a committee member he gave the impression of being a loner, that he kept his own counsel, that he had his own thoughts, that he was making his very own proposals. And he was passionate—he was really passionate for the underdog, really genuinely. He had no particular feeling for money, that a million meant the same thing as five hundred million or a billion, too. He didn't have any real feeling for what a dollar meant. He was very bold in that, too. I think boldness was the major feature about him that impressed me.

VANDEN HEUVEL: Among his Democratic colleagues on a committee, for example, was he highly regarded? Did he work well?

JAVITS: He carried great prestige with them. There was something about him that carried great prestige, whether they thought he could be President or whether they just were reverential about the name and the tragedy he had known. But he carried great prestige. He carried much more prestige than Ted. They were much more reluctant to vote him down than Ted. And yet he didn't do nearly the selling job and didn't perhaps know the issue in a legal way as well, though in an emotional way he knew it much better. He felt it very deeply and expressed himself that way. But he really did carry a lot of weight strictly on a personal basis—that is, the basis of his own prestige and the quality of the man. Ted has to work harder, do more homework, sell more and is more likely to be turned down. But even there something of the reverence for the Kennedys persists and he'd have a better chance to carry something than another Democrat.

VANDEN HEUVEL: How did the Republican members of the committee think of him?

JAVITS: The Republican members thought of him as, I think, aside from myself and maybe one or two others, but I think on the whole they saw him as a very strong, wily and effective opponent and a fellow who was not on their side. And I think that had a tendency to get mixed up with the good things which he was capable of swinging and his objectives. They looked at him, I think, more as a very potent and dangerous, "political opponent."

VANDEN HEUVEL: Did you have any sense of the conflicts or relationship
between President Lyndon B. Johnson and Robert Kennedy?

JAVITS: Yes. The conflict was very evident to me because we knew so much about what went on on the inside. And then another thing is that I had very considerable access to President Johnson. Indeed, I should say that of all the Presidents I've served under—and I've served under Harry S. Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson and now Richard M. Nixon—I had the most access to President Johnson. And I think, though a Senator does have, especially a Senator from New York, considerable access to Presidents, I think it was a little over-accented in my case because Kennedy was my colleague and I think the White House was rather interested in dealing with me all they could.

VANDEN HEUVEL: What about Robert Kennedy as a Senator? On the floor of the Senate how did he perform? How was he evaluated by his colleagues? And how do you think... How would you judge that, or did the time span, abbreviated as it was by his own tragedy, foreclose any perspective to the historical judgment?

JAVITS: No. I think that he was a very effective personality on the floor. When he went after something, he went after it with perseverance and doggedness, and again that quality of aloneness, but of distinction and of passion, helped. And like in the committee, he carried a lot of the desire, especially on the Democratic side, of going along with him, that if he wanted something, you tried very hard—at least they did—to go with him and give it to him. And I think, comparing him now with his younger brother, Ted, Ted has to work harder, has to persuade more and is much more in the mainstream of being a Senator. Bobby was an exception. He was an unusual personality on the floor and was treated in an unusual way.

VANDEN HEUVEL: Was he an effective speaker?

JAVITS: Yes. When he got really impassioned, he was a very effective speaker. And he was a strong debater and a rough-and-tumble debater and he had some of the arrogance and boldness there that he had in his nature.

VANDEN HEUVEL: Did you have the feeling that his talking was generally the product of staff work, or did you have the feeling that he had commanded his own expertness in a given field?

JAVITS: Generally speaking, he spoke on his own. I think he spoke less from staff preparation than most other Senators. Now, that had deficiencies in that he wasn't too strong on his factual structure, but it had advantages that he was very spontaneous and very eloquent in a personal sense. But mainly it was the fact that he was a loner—you could see that—that he had great passion, and that he did carry a unique kind of status especially on the Democratic side. And even
on the Republican side he was listened to because he was considered to be a very dangerous "political opponent."

VANDEN HEUVEL: You've described him on several occasions now, this quality of aloneness or being a loner, working alone. Many people felt that he was an abrasive kind of personality. You've talked about the passion he brought to arguments. Many people felt equal passions about him, love and hate. In the context of the Senate and the importance that the Senate has in the United States, were these passions evident? I mean, did people hate him?

JAVITS: I wasn't conscious of anybody really hating Bob. They feared him. They thought he was a dangerous "opponent," or they had a certain reverence about him and his history and what he meant, or they were fascinated by the loner aspect of him and his boldness and something of a touch of arrogance because of his boldness. But I was not conscious of anybody hating him.

VANDEN HEUVEL: Senators who feel so proud of the Senate as a club, or as a very remarkable democratic institution, sometimes are said to have felt that he was using it as a way station and that he never really was a Senator. Did you have feelings about that?

JAVITS: I don't think he was a Senate man, but I think he was a Senator in the sense of using his force and intellect and power to get legislative things done. I don't think he just used the Senate as a platform or a forum to get on to be President of the United States. But he evaluated it for what it was: a great legislative body in which an effective man can get a lot done that affects history. And in his way, he used it that way. But he was not a Senate man, not a member of the club, not a Senate man even in my sense of knowing the intimate parliamentary workings and using them to effectuate the things that I feel urgently need to get done for our people and our country.

VANDEN HEUVEL: In New York State, several of the projects that had great meaning, probably foremost among them in his career was Bedford-Stuyvesant, and I know that he looked upon you as a valued associate and that your assistance was absolutely crucial to the success of that. Do you recall the development of that project in the context of cooperating with him?

JAVITS: He got me into Bedford-Stuyvesant by directly asking me to come into it. I mean, there was no circumlocution about that. And frankly because he wanted it bipartisan and the two people that he wanted in it, beyond anyone else, were the Mayor and myself. And I thought it was a brilliant concept, which I'm now using myself in respect to the South Bronx. And I gave him every credit for it. And I think it was one case, whatever may be the caution in my own character—which I'm sure exists, certainly as contrasted with Robert Kennedy—in
which I went all out to give him credit, to work with him and to do it because I was admiring of the sheer virtuosity of having originated this idea and put it together. And I still admire it to this day, so much so that I think I was the main influence in getting Ethel \[Knakel Kennedy\] on this board and getting her interested so she works at it. I told her that this was the greatest memorial she could give her husband because it was really the single act of the greatest virtuosity with which he was connected, in my judgment, in public affairs.

VANDEN HEUVEL: Do you remember the meeting with Benno Schmidt in his office at Rockefeller Center that morning?

JAVITS: I certainly do and I think he, again, made an apostle out of Benno. And it's been a big thing in Benno's life and it was great for both of them. And every part of a Bedford-Stuyvesant effort. . . . I can't think of anything in respect to Bedford-Stuyvesant which I would fault Robert Kennedy. On the contrary, I think it was his finest hour. And it brought that kind of a response from me. And I've never gotten over it. I'm still devoted to Bedford-Stuyvesant because of him.

VANDEN HEUVEL: Another joint enterprise was the police review board.

JAVITS: Well, that we failed in, but it was a failure with great pleasure and pride. He stuck it out. He knew it was politically bad, just as I did. We both thought we'd get the pants trimmed off us, which we did. But he believed in it as I believed in it, believed it was the right fight to make in order to alleviate somewhat the rigors of police administration and the seeming incapacity to exercise any supervision over it really, any oversight—I think that's a better word. And I thought it was a very genuine fight by him, it was a politically damaging one—which he could well stand, just as I could—and I thought it was altogether admirable and creditable. And I really felt that it was one time we were really comrades-in-arms. We were doing it together for the same reason and he was a wonderful sport about it and didn't at all try nicely to calculate the political risk.